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## LEBANESE TRADERS IN COTONOU: A SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND CAPITAL ACCUMULATION

*J. Joost Beuving*

'Listen,' my friend Ahmad, a stout Lebanese second-hand car trader in his early forties, says to me one Saturday night in 2003 while he gently wraps his arm around Aisha, a young and attractive west African girl, 'Life is nice around here, don't you agree?'<sup>1</sup> We sit in the basement of the Sheraton hotel in Cotonou, capital of Bénin, which has recently been transformed into a popular karaoke bar. The other people in the bar, a mixture of local and foreign faces, are seated in luxurious chairs scattered across the basement floor, mostly engaged in animated conversation. Ahmad looks about him, and I see how he spots several familiar faces among them, mainly fellow car traders. While Ahmad reaches out for a bottle of Black Label on a nearby table and fixes a drink for Mathieu, a young west African man sitting next to him, he adds: 'Here in this Cotonou, I'm at home, and look how I'm free to do what I want.' Meanwhile, the thumping music has stirred up quite a crowd and, seconds later, Aisha gets up, holds out a hand towards Ahmad and swiftly disappears with him onto the dance floor.

Ahmad's night out at the Sheraton brings out the central theme of this article: the presence of Lebanese immigrant trading communities in urban west Africa today. The study is situated in Cotonou, a west African port town that witnessed the rapid emergence of a large-scale trade in second-hand cars from western Europe during the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> The second-hand car trade in Bénin provides an interesting setting in which to further our understanding of Lebanese traders in west Africa for the following three reasons. First, it presents an economic domain in which Lebanese traders operate alongside their west African counterparts on a daily basis. Second, the car trade has attracted different types of Lebanese businessmen. Building on a long settlement history in the region, some of the Lebanese were already working in Cotonou and merely changed trades, while others migrated from Lebanon to Cotonou specifically to set up a second-hand car business. Third, the Lebanese in the west African car trade typically exhibit complicated patterns of economic mobility, characterized by fluctuating business

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<sup>1</sup> Most of my conversations were carried out in French; I later translated this quote and others that follow it in the article.

<sup>2</sup> Trade statistics show an increase in the number of imported second-hand European cars from a few thousand per year in the mid-1980s to about 200,000 by the year 2000 (Beuving 2004).

revenues, multiple economic activity, and mixed Lebanese–African business networks.

An abundance of literature debates historical patterns of Lebanese migration and capital accumulation in Africa,<sup>3</sup> yet far less is known about contemporary Lebanese (migrant) trading communities in urban west Africa. The available academic writing on this topic usually stresses the ‘strangeness’ of the Lebanese by portraying them as a special grouping in west African society. Two lines of thought have been developed to support this view. On the one hand, some authors have stressed the isolation of the Lebanese from wider African society. Bierwirth, for instance, argues for Côte d’Ivoire that ‘Lebanese ... contacts with indigenous peoples are limited to the workplace, where they deal with Africans only as employees and customers’ (1999: 95). Others have proposed viewing the Lebanese as a business elite, which seeks patronage from an African polity to safeguard control of trade resources (Boone 1994; Boumedouha 1990).<sup>4</sup> In stressing the purposiveness of social relations with members of the African host society, both views thus adopt a ‘trader as stranger’ perspective.<sup>5</sup> The capacity to act instrumentally towards the outer world is an important factor in this perspective, explaining the so-called business acumen of certain groups of migrant traders<sup>6</sup> chiefly because it removes them from social obligations that may lead to disaccumulation and immobilization of capital (Portes 1995: 14). However, as Marina Rais perceptively points out, not all Lebanese traders appear equally able to develop profitable businesses: ‘because of their image as successful entrepreneurs it is consistently overlooked in the literature that an unknown number of them did not make it and returned to Lebanon’ (1988: 6). This suggests a more complicated connection between, on the one hand, the way that Lebanese traders relate to African society and, on the other, the performance of their businesses. Hence the objective of this article: to readdress the determining factors of Lebanese migrant enterprise in the context of the second-hand car trade in Bénin.

Lebanese traders in west Africa are organized into distinct migrant communities, which are open social entities: members maintain contacts with other migrant communities, and with the west African societies wherein they reside. For most Lebanese traders this means that they interact in their day-to-day lives with a multiplicity of social contacts,

<sup>3</sup> Rais (1988) offers an exhaustive bibliographical reference list, which I will therefore not repeat here.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Bauer (1954) develops a similar view in his classic study of trade in West Africa; he argues that before independence the economic position of Lebanese traders in Africa depended on their connections with European authorities that gave them access to the licence-regulated colonial economy.

<sup>5</sup> This perspective is associated with the work of Georg Simmel, who noticed that ‘Throughout the history of economics the stranger everywhere appears as the trader, or the trader as stranger’ (Wolf 1964: 403).

<sup>6</sup> The capacity of particular groupings to run profitable business has been observed elsewhere: the Bamileke of Cameroon (Warnier 1995), for instance, or the Otovalo Indians of Ecuador (Kyle 1999).

comprising marked differences in social class, ethnicity and religious cosmology. It is therefore analytically difficult to establish an *a priori* relation between the structure of Lebanese social contacts and the working of their businesses. To understand how Lebanese traders handle their business networks, this article therefore seeks to develop an understanding of Lebanese social contacts 'from within'. In doing so, the article adopts an anthropological perspective that apprehends patterns of social interaction as dynamic arrangements of power and prestige, embedded in concrete, ongoing sets of personal relations, with kinsmen but also including friends (Granovetter 1985; Schweizer 1997). In this perspective, ample attention is paid to the concrete social situations in which particular relationships emerge, with a view to uncovering the way traders simultaneously coordinate and regulate different economic, political and other social roles (Cohen 1969). The resulting insight into the traders' social universe, in turn, enables us to understand how they establish networks of personal relations which function as channels for resource mobilization (including learning) and capital accumulation.<sup>7</sup>

In order to understand how Lebanese traders in Cotonou incorporate different social relations into their enterprises, it is first necessary to appreciate the broader organizational pattern of the Lebanese second-hand car business. A description of their main trading practices shows that they have developed an advanced form of vertical business integration that links European to west African car markets and ties traders, shipping companies, cars and bureaucratic procedures into complex chains of relations. It furthermore reveals that Lebanese traders carry out their trade in connection with other, often older, economic activity; their professional lives show a pattern of combining or switching among various economic activities or occupations. This reflects a form of business organization called a 'multiple enterprise': the simultaneous participation of individuals in more than one branch of economic activity (Long 1977: 123).

An important consequence is that changes in economic careers coincide with changes in the network of business contacts. To understand the direction that an enterprise takes, an appreciation is therefore needed of the history of business contacts. In order to illuminate this second essential point, this article reconstructs in detail the career of an ordinary Lebanese entrepreneur, car trader Ahmad Tannir. This career history draws on about a hundred conversations with two dozen individuals in Cotonou, involving both Lebanese and west Africans, carried out during fifteen months of fieldwork in west Africa between June 2000 and December 2003. To reconstruct Ahmad's career I also collected the life histories of several key persons in his business network, complementing these with direct observations

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<sup>7</sup> There is nowadays an abundance of literature in support of this view, which was developed by social anthropologists in the 1970s (see in particular Boissevain 1974, Kapferer 1972, and Long 1979).

of their everyday lives in Cotonou. With this narrative of Ahmad's professional career, I do not claim statistical representativeness from data sampled on a probability basis. Detailed study of one career, however, helps to uncover broader processes of capital accumulation and economic mobility. It therefore allows comparison with other immigrant traders operating in situations characterized by similar or contrasting parameters (Mitchell 1983).

Analysis of the career history reveals a third point: that Lebanese traders in Cotonou do not generally cultivate their contacts. The social dynamics of their business networks cannot therefore be reduced to a building up of interpersonal trust,<sup>8</sup> and viewing Lebanese traders as investors in the 'social capital' of their business relations is not the appropriate way to understand their actions.<sup>9</sup> Instead, this article will show how the Lebanese operating the second-hand car trade demonstrate a more impulsive form of social relations management. Close study of the case material reveals that it presents a form of contact mobilization which is informed by an important cultural factor, aptly voiced by Ahmad at the beginning of this article: the wish to enjoy life.

#### LEBANESE TRADERS IN THE WEST AFRICAN SECOND-HAND CAR TRADE

Before embarking on the study of Lebanese car traders in Cotonou, we must first establish the dimensions of the Lebanese community there. A word of warning beforehand. It should be realized that people denominated in west African popular language as 'Lebanese' appear on closer scrutiny to be a mixture of Arabic-speaking peoples of the Mediterranean, in particular, Muslim and Christian Arabs of the Levant (Jordan, Syria and Lebanon).<sup>10</sup> This conceptual obscurity is also observed in official migration statistics: whereas Béninese migration authorities keep impressive lists of migrants' origins, Arab-speaking migrants are usually grouped under the not very informative heading '*reste du monde*'.<sup>11</sup> The largely unrecorded nature of Lebanese commercial enterprise further limits more precise assessments of their achievements.

Lebanese spokesmen report that, in the late 1970s, about 175 Lebanese were registered as resident in Bénin (personal communication, Lebanese World Cultural Union [LWCU], 2004). Most of them

<sup>8</sup> Attributing primacy to the development of trust relations is a stance widely adopted in studies of migrant traders; see for recent examples Portes (1995), Stoller and McConatha (2001) or Diouf (2000).

<sup>9</sup> For similar criticisms see Putzel (1997), Fine (1999) and Johnston and Percy-Smith (2003).

<sup>10</sup> This confusion of names was already noted much earlier elsewhere in west Africa; see, for instance, van der Laan 1975.

<sup>11</sup> The population census administered in 1992 by the Béninese government (République du Bénin 1994) gives a figure of 1.6 per cent for this category. Although a third population census was carried out in 2002, its results have unfortunately not yet been made public.

appear to have been descendants of Christian Maronite families<sup>12</sup> who had settled in this part of west Africa during the late nineteenth century (David 1998; van der Laan 1992). Their numbers increased steadily, reaching 300 in the 1980s (Rais 1988: 4) and 400 by the early 1990s (Igué and Soulé 1992). The arrival of significant numbers of Sunni Muslim traders around that time, followed by a similar influx of their Shi'a Muslim countrymen a few years later, saw the Lebanese population expand to about 2,500 individuals (personal communication, LWCU 2004). These demographic figures are quite unremarkable (less than 0.5 per thousand of Bénin's population) compared to nearby countries,<sup>13</sup> yet the limited size of the Lebanese population in Bénin should not be confounded with the extent of their significance in Béninese economic life. As elsewhere in west African cities, even the casual visitor roaming the streets of Cotonou is bound to encounter Lebanese men. The more careful observer will regularly see Lebanese keeping shops (mainly groceries, warehouses and supermarkets), running restaurants, managing hotels and operating small manufacturing industries. The densest concentration of Lebanese, however, is found when one walks across one of Cotonou's numerous car markets. Sprawled at ease in old car seats making their selling pitches, or rushing across the market with their briefcases firmly pressed against their chests, or restlessly pacing up and down while telephoning, often coaxing a giggly reaction out of their African auditors close by, these Lebanese traders easily catch the eye. About half of them are Sunni Muslims, they are well established in the car trade, and it is to this specific group of traders that I will dedicate further attention in this article. Their commercial organization appears to rest on two main elements.

First, these Lebanese traders have become prominent economic agents on the Cotonou car market today through their numerical prevalence.<sup>14</sup> This is most clearly noticeable in the widespread practice of import-licence sharing. Veteran Lebanese traders, in particular, hire

<sup>12</sup> The Maronites, a denomination within the Eastern Catholic Church, are the Lebanon's largest Christian grouping.

<sup>13</sup> By way of comparison, Bierwirth (1999: 85), for instance, estimates the Lebanese immigrant population in Côte d'Ivoire at around 70,000 during the 1990s; Boumedouha (1990: 546) reports a figure of about 30,000 Lebanese in Senegal by the late 1980s; and sources for Nigeria suggest 40,000 to 50,000 persons (Falola 1990).

<sup>14</sup> What little statistical evidence there is on the size of the Lebanese (car) trading community in Cotonou supports this impression. Perret, for instance, found that of all the trading companies registered at the Trade Ministry, about one fifth were directed by Lebanese (2002: 39). Although this figure corresponds with the proportion of Lebanese companies registered at the Chamber of Commerce under the entry '*Véhicules d'occasion*' (Chambre de Commerce 2002), the reluctance to adhere to administrative procedures widely found among Lebanese car traders should cast doubt on this figure. Too often I heard remarks such as 'We Arabs, we don't like paperwork', or 'We avoid the bureaucrats as much as we can' to give much credibility to official registers. The survey that I administered to alleviate some of this doubt reveals that approximately two thirds of about 750 trading companies actually present on the Cotonou car market display Arabic names.

out these expensive licences,<sup>15</sup> which are a mandatory requirement for traders to import second-hand cars into Cotonou, and this practice enables west African and Lebanese novice traders lacking sufficient cash to venture into car importation. Furthermore, Lebanese traders have come to control the wholesale second-hand car trade in Cotonou.<sup>16</sup> This Lebanese predominance has led to envy, particularly among veteran west African traders: 'They have taken our jobs,' a well-established trader says, voicing the local view of Lebanese as successful businessmen. 'The Lebanese rule us now! Each vessel is filled with their cars. Our business is big for us, but it means nothing to them.' Nonetheless, large groups of novice African car traders, eager to enter the business but lacking overseas contacts for car importation, increasingly source their cars from Lebanese wholesalers. This trade practice starts immediately on arrival of the second-hand cars by boat in the port of Cotonou, where it is common to see African traders crowd round their Lebanese colleagues, looking for a good bargain.

Second, these Lebanese traders integrate crucial nodes of the commodity chain linking Europe and west Africa. In addition to the car trade itself, the Lebanese are particularly active in the fields of transport, handling and money transfer. Large European shipping companies owned most of the vessels that brought the second-hand cars to their west African destinations in the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> This changed when the Lebanese businessman, Abou Mehri, started sailing 'reefer' ships (carrying refrigerated and other cargoes) from Antwerp to the west African coast in 1997, followed in 2000 by a similar endeavour by the Tunisian-Cypriot company, ACLN. The Lebanese involvement with shipping is much older, however, and began with Lebanese businessmen acting as ship brokers – agents specializing in booking idle cargo space. Mostly operating from downtown Brussels, but also to be found in other European capital cities, these agents at first only dealt with shipping procedures – their profit margins a function of prevailing shipping prices. Later they also began to undertake the transportation of second-hand cars from markets and other outlets to the European ports of departure. Lebanese business contacts thus developed into the organizational base for a significant part of the Europe–west Africa transport chain. Their contacts also function as channels for money

<sup>15</sup> The annual cost of an import licence is approximately equal to the purchase price of two second-hand cars, an amount of money beyond the reach of most smaller car traders.

<sup>16</sup> Large Lebanese importers import up to a hundred cars per month; and at the height of the car 'boom' in Cotonou around the year 2000 even smaller Lebanese traders still imported a few dozen cars per month – substantially more than most African car traders introduce to the market. These results follow from analysis of 2,315 sales receipts, collected in a survey carried out among 25 car traders in Cotonou, including ten Lebanese. I complemented this formal database by regular return visits, during which I kept track of sales through casual conversation with the traders and through direct observation of car sales.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, the Italian shipping company, Grimaldi, operated the specialized car-carrying ships (*roro*) that arrived in west Africa during the late 1980s. In 1993 the Norwegian shipper Høegh-Ugland Auto Liners (Hual) stepped in, followed in 1995 by the British shipper, OT African Line.



flows. In its simplest form, this consists of a Lebanese trader travelling to a business partner, carrying cash on him. It is a common practice, but a risky one: in Cotonou, stories abound of money couriers being robbed by highwaymen.<sup>18</sup> Some of these networks specialized and became money transfer agencies, especially after the introduction of the mobile phone in west Africa, and operate today mainly on a 'transfer-by-phone' basis. For the car business, this creates temporary cash surpluses at the west African trade hubs, and so some of the agencies use this cash to issue loans to needy traders, mostly Lebanese. West Africans gain access to this credit system through their personal relations with Lebanese traders.

Thus far I have tried to show that Lebanese traders are encountered at most points in the Europe–west Africa second-hand car trading network. In Cotonou, Lebanese traders are found in most car markets, and their numbers have increased with the expansion of the car trade there. Lebanese traders interact with their west African colleagues minimally through sharing import licences, retailing second-hand cars and issuing credit. To better appreciate the social dynamics of such Lebanese–African business relations, the next section examines in detail the economic career of a particular Lebanese trader, Ahmad. The empirical material collected during the fieldwork is organized as a narrative of Ahmad's professional history, with occasional descriptive asides about individuals connected to him. Careful review of this history shows five distinct episodes, entailing specific sets of (personal) contacts, different places of residence and various modes of economic activity. They are discussed in greater detail below.

#### MULTIPLE ENTERPRISE IN COTONOU: THE CASE OF AHMAD

##### *Early days in Beirut, 1962–87*

Ahmad Tannir was born in 1962 into an impoverished Sunni Muslim merchant family of eleven. Both his father and mother originated from Beirut and they lived there after their marriage in the 1950s. Ahmad's father, Afif, was a local salesman, specializing in dairy products, and he had just purchased land in a suburb of Beirut when he died unexpectedly in 1971. After his death, the family was at first divided among Afif's family, but a few years later Ahmad and his brother Abu-Zeid, who was five years older, moved in with their elder sister Jinan and her newly-wed husband Ali Hijazi in their downtown apartment (for these and other kinship relations, see Figure 1). Although Ahmad lived in Ali Hijazi's house for a number of years, he had little contact with his older brother-in-law during this time. Being the eldest son of a well-established textile trader in Cotonou, Ali Hijazi spent most of his time overseas. The textile trade prospered, and Abu-Zeid, at the age of eighteen, was sent to live with him, leaving Ahmad to fend for himself.

<sup>18</sup> Local newspapers such as *La Nation* and *Le Matinal* offer weekly stories of such *coupeurs de route*: in rare cases these hold-ups resulted in a shoot-out.



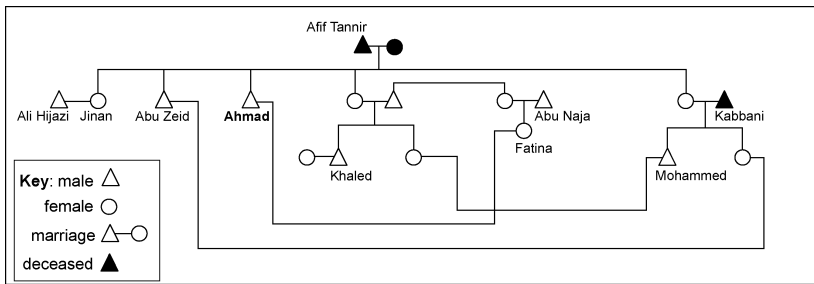


FIGURE 1 Concise genealogy of the Tannir family.

During these turbulent years Ahmad went to school from time to time, but after his mother's death in 1980 ended her family's financial support, he dropped out. Without a trade or sustenance, Ahmad was quickly recruited by Muslim militia and fought for about a year in war-stricken Beirut. Although the militiamen typically received little in the way of military pay, they usually made up for it through different sorts of petty trade. In Ahmad's case, he ventured into the profitable business of selling chocolate bars among his fellow combatants. Building on cash left from his father's estate, Ahmad succeeded in gathering sufficient capital to marry his distant relative, Fatina Naja, later that year (1982). Photographs taken at the wedding reveal Ahmad's sorry economic state at the time: we see a simply dressed couple flanked by a handful of guests in a battered building. The photographs also show the presence of only a few family members: war and destitution had scattered them.

A shrapnel injury prematurely ended Ahmad's military career. With the little money that remained after the wedding, he tried to reactivate Afif's former dairy trade. For that, Ahmad managed to borrow Hijazi's younger brother's run-down lorry and started to visit his father's former business contacts in the environs of Beirut. His army contacts allowed him to get swiftly past the roadblocks that controlled the traffic to and from the besieged inner city. With Fatina keeping shop at the Hijazi's, Ahmad succeeded in ensuring a steady flow of dairy produce – mostly fresh milk. Retailing the milk proved more complicated. With their clientele fluctuating, and in the absence of a stable power supply to refrigerate the perishable produce, their business soon slowed down. In response to the Hijazis' objections over the space needed to operate the dairy, in mid-1986 the couple prepared to settle elsewhere. Hijazi's request for assistance following the return of Abu-Zeid from west Africa later that year drastically changed Ahmad's outlook. Leaving Fatina in the care of her parents, he then set a new life course on a cargo ship travelling to west Africa in early 1987.

#### *First stay abroad: Cotonou and Delta state, 1987–92*

Until the late 1980s/early 1990s, when Igbo traders took over the textile trade, Hijazi's enterprise prospered. Hijazi had been one of the first Sunni Muslim traders to challenge the commercial hegemony of the

long-established Christian Lebanese merchant houses of Bénin.<sup>19</sup> By the time Ahmad arrived in Cotonou, Hijazi, having peddled textiles and cloth for some time, had secured a market stall at a prominent place in Cotonou's Misèboh street market. Though Hijazi had rented a spacious house near Cotonou's international airport, Ahmad moved in with his nephew Mohammed Kabbani – also a textile trader. Their living together proved important for Ahmad's training as a trader: while he operated Hijazi's stall during the day, after work he and his nephew discussed the tricks of the west African textile trade. Around the same time, and encouraged by some of Mohammed's friends, Ahmad started spending his leisure time at El Dorado, a prominent beach club in Cotonou. Young Lebanese men consider this a popular place for socializing, and there they participate in outdoor sports, drink and meet African girls. Ahmad quickly developed a taste for this; so that, despite his limited living expenses, his profit from the textile business could barely keep up with his new spending habits.

The year 1988 marked an important shift in Ahmad's economic career. Early that year, his father-in-law, Abu Naja, invited him over to Nigeria's oil-rich Delta state. Abu Naja had for a long time been working for a small subcontracting company specializing in oil pipeline maintenance, and had recently been promoted to workshop manager. In his new capacity, Abu Naja controlled the recruitment of new personnel. Abu Naja had fathered four daughters but no sons, and he wanted a close male relative nearby to handle the workshop's day-to-day activities. In addition, Abu Naja favoured the newcomer Ahmad for the (prestigious) job because he had come to know him as a more enterprising young man than the more experienced Mohammed, even though his textile trade was declining. Ahmad's departure greatly upset Mohammed, who commented scornfully: 'My brother, he does as he pleases, he thinks he's become big already.' The division that arose between them determined their social relations for the next few years, and hence would have a profound effect on the course of Ahmad's professional life.

Ahmad's new job was much to his liking. Pictures from his Nigerian stay show air-conditioned offices, chauffeur-driven cars, and whitewashed, spacious accommodation. What is more, he received a fixed salary per month. And although with Abu Naja around Ahmad was required to regularly transfer a substantial sum to his wife in Lebanon, still a significant amount was left to finance a luxurious personal life. During these days Ahmad further learned to speak Pidgin English (and some Yoruba) by dealing on a day-to-day basis with Nigerian employees. Ahmad's training in negotiating with west African officialdom took shape after he increasingly came to stand in for Abu Naja, whose health deteriorated following a series of illnesses early in 1990. In 1992 Abu Naja was consequently forced to resign, so that he could no longer renew Ahmad's contract. As Ahmad's attempts

<sup>19</sup> Well-known examples include Azar-textiles, the Dorr company, and Fadi-Wehe.

to apply for jobs in Nigeria failed, he then returned to Cotonou. His re-establishment there turned out to be difficult, though. Whereas Hijazi's textile company had proved more robust than Kabbani's, under pressure of increased competition Hijazi's company had gone downhill as well, until bankruptcy seemed imminent. Hijazi then quickly sold the remaining textiles, closed the market stall and left the country soon after, leaving Ahmad little choice but to join him.

*Return to Beirut, 1992–1995*

Ahmad's return to Beirut coincided with Lebanon's post-war reconstruction. Following peace negotiations in 1990–1, money started pouring into the country from Lebanese communities worldwide, reviving the national economy and boosting commerce. The relative abundance of money and unprecedented optimism are therefore the background to Ahmad's next few years in Beirut. Again working through his family contacts, Ahmad started to run his older brother Mahmoud's grocery store. Mahmoud had migrated to Saudi Arabia, where he worked as a cleaner and occasionally sent back some money. Abu-Zeid had operated the store single-handedly during the years preceding Ahmad's return; now the brothers worked the store together for some time. Their collaboration became successful following expansion of the shop after they started retailing luxury goods – particularly chocolate bars. It ended in 1993 as a consequence of two significant events: first, Mohammed persuaded Abu-Zeid to return to west Africa; and, second, Ahmad's wife Fatina gave birth to their first child, a daughter.

After his textile business had failed, and lacking business contacts in Nigeria, Mohammed had stayed in Cotonou, restlessly seeking an alternative trade. Through his frequent visits to El Dorado he learned that the well-known Yoruba cotton exporter, El Hadj Séfou, had plans to open a market downtown specializing in the sale of second-hand cars. Until the early 1990s, the second-hand car trade in Cotonou was an inconspicuous business, dominated mainly by Yoruba ambulant traders. Some of them still remember how their fellow traders loathed their trade: 'We stayed in the open air all day, the work made us dirty, and on our way home they mocked us.' They all wanted to avoid this stream of insults and the creation of a properly equipped market quickly proved successful; most of the veteran traders chose to settle there, but it soon attracted novice businessmen as well. It also contributed to the market's success that Séfou did not demand collateral from car traders, but levied a commission on car sales instead – thus limiting the capital requirements for the trade. Further, the commercial agency that Séfou obtained in 1990 from the worldwide Italian shipping company, Grimaldi, guaranteed smooth port-handling procedures in Cotonou. Finally, Lac d'Afrique, a Paris-based Yoruba trading company connected to Séfou, sourced an abundance of second-hand cars for its first few shipments, thus creating a temporary surplus of cars in Cotonou. These four elements opened the way for a new category of car traders to emerge in Cotonou – resellers. Mohammed Kabbani and his Lebanese friend, the former textile trader Tony Micha,

were among the first Lebanese businessmen to start a business buying and selling cars in Cotonou.

In the early 1990s, contacts between Séfou and Grimaldi turned sour over unsettled shipping bills and the payment of port duties. The available evidence suggests that Tony Micha stepped in, first, by skilfully talking Grimaldi out of the business deal with Séfou, and, second, by mediating the negotiations of a group of Lebanese businessmen, mainly based in Brussels and Essen, with the Béninese government to open a car market at a newly designated area adjacent to the port. Given the official Béninese trade policy of 'import-led economic development' (Igué 1999), the tax base that Tony Micha had in prospect through creating a large car market was a temptation that the Béninese government, strapped by structural adjustment measures, could not refuse. Most of 1993, therefore, saw Tony Micha occupied with coordinating the opening of the new market, but after its inauguration early in 1994 he started travelling to Europe where he helped to organize the collection and dispatch of second-hand cars to Cotonou. Micha's overseas contacts boosted Mohammed's career as a car importer, especially after he linked up with a Lebanese shipper known for his favourable credit conditions. Mohammed soon found that sourcing vehicles required a great deal of travelling in western Europe's second-hand car belt (roughly confined by the triangle Essen-Brussels-Utrecht). His travels abroad therefore directed much of Mohammed's time away from his affairs on the Cotonou car market. With his only (younger) brother working as a construction engineer in Saudi Arabia, Mohammed therefore approached Abu-Zeid, whom he knew from their joint episode in the textile trade, to handle his car sales in Cotonou.

Ahmad, meanwhile, became acquainted with family life in Beirut. This had two consequences for his stay there. First, after she had recovered from her pregnancy, Fatina replaced Abu-Zeid in the grocery. Although Fatina proved an enterprising shopkeeper, to Ahmad's displeasure the shift in personnel also encouraged Abu Naja's interference in the course of their business. He regularly dropped in at the shop and was never short of a snide remark, often in the presence of customers. Second, with his two elder brothers abroad, Ahmad increasingly had to act as head of the family. Thus he was confronted with the pressing problem of finding a suitable husband for two of his younger sisters. In short, family life in Lebanon offered little in the way of the carefree personal life that Ahmad had come to enjoy during his earlier west African stay. Following Abu-Zeid's optimistic accounts of the opportunities offered by the rapidly expanding car markets in Bénin, half-way through 1995 Ahmad therefore booked a flight for himself, Fatina and their child to Cotonou, and left Lebanon.

### *Second stay abroad: Cotonou and Côte d'Ivoire, 1995–2000*

When Ahmad came to Cotonou with his family, the car business was unmistakably on its way to becoming the city's most manifest commercial activity. By then, a significant number of car markets were fully operational in areas downtown, fed by huge car-carrying ships

mooring frequently in the port, bringing increasing numbers of second-hand cars from all corners of western Europe. Likewise contributing to the business's visibility were the large numbers of car buyers who started to pour into Bénin's economic centre looking for a good bargain, coming mostly from neighbouring countries, but also from places as far away as Chad, Cameroon and Congo. In an attempt to curb the incidence of traffic accidents caused by speeding cars bound for these markets further afield, and seeking to regularize their mostly illegal border crossings, the Béninese government promoted the organization of the car transports in convoys. The joint broadcasting on Bénin's national television channel of the convoys' departure schedules with the timetables of arriving car ships illustrates well how important the car business in Cotonou had become by the mid-1990s. It was an exciting time, Ahmad recalls: 'there was money in this business, every franc you put into it effortlessly multiplied, those were the days when everyone gained'.

After their arrival, the couple briefly stayed at Abu-Zeid's, but a few weeks later Ahmad found accommodation for his family in one of the apartment blocks built during Cotonou's modest construction boom of the early 1990s. Ahmad could afford to pay the sizeable down-payment for the apartment with money made in the grocery trade. While Fatina did her chores at home, Ahmad joined Abu-Zeid on his rounds of the car market and thus became acquainted with the various aspects of car trading in Cotonou. Abu-Zeid also helped Ahmad to secure the use of a selling pitch in a remote corner of Tony Micha's market, but later Ahmad succeeded in getting access to a better place near the main gate. These selling pitches play a key role in the informal organization of the Cotonou market. Originally marked out by narrow passages between lanes of parked cars, car markets constructed after the mid-1990s offered fenced areas, surveyed by plank-and-pole platforms, elevated on stilts and roofed with a corrugated iron sheet. These first *paillotes*, probably copies of similar structures found in the older car markets of Lomé, were built and used by individual businessmen; but with the influx of new traders they increasingly came to function as collective meeting places. In some cases, wealthy traders started constructing *paillotes* surplus to their own needs, and then handed them out to newcomers to the trade. Thus, when Ahmad wanted to settle as a car trader in Cotonou, he followed Abu-Zeid and moved into the *paillote* built by their nephew Mohammed a few months earlier. This step shaped the subsequent course of Ahmad's career in three ways: first, Ahmad thus developed close contacts with west Africans; second, it brought him into renewed contact with Mohammed Kabbani; and, third, he gained access to a circle of prestigious business contacts based at Cotonou's Sheraton hotel.

The occupants of a *paillote* are generally not a haphazard collection of individuals. Usually, though not exclusively, they present an ethnically homogeneous group, marked by some form of previous contact. This promotes collaboration between them, and it is thus quite common for Lebanese traders operating from the same selling pitch to share the

specialist services offered on the Cotonou car market by young west African men, ranging from car cleaners and guards, via metalworkers and car mechanics to clearing agents. Among these was Mathieu, a young Béninese mechanic, who had one day come along with his elder brother to carry out the routine job of fixing a broken car door for Abu-Zeid. The young man's competence impressed Ahmad, so that a few weeks later, when one of his cars broke down at the port, he called Mathieu for advice. The young technician turned up much more promptly than Ahmad had anticipated and soon restored the defective car to working order. In recognition, the next weekend Ahmad invited Mathieu to his house for dinner, a habit they would keep up throughout their contact.

Until 1998, Ahmad earned a living reselling cars, and his business generally followed the upswing of the second-hand car market in Cotonou during the 1990s. In contrast to the growing number of resellers who ventured into the port during the disembarkation of the car-carrying ships, Ahmad by and large took over cars from Lebanese traders, first only from Abu-Zeid, but later also from other colleagues occupying the same *paillote*. This form of trade came to an end with one of Mohammed Kabbani's rare return visits to west Africa later that year. Shortly after his arrival, he turned to Ahmad and offered him the possibility of handling and trading several cars on behalf of one of his European business partners. Offers to conduct such 'mediated' business became increasingly common among Lebanese businessmen by the mid-1990s. With the short-lived commercial success of the Belgian-based Tunisian-Cypriot second-hand car trading company, ACLN, on their minds,<sup>20</sup> and encouraged by cheap shipping rates to west Africa and the recently created possibility of paying the freight charges upon delivery at destination, many Lebanese businessmen in Europe sought ways to invest in the west African car trade. Traders like Mohammed could offer them a ready solution through their (family) contacts in west African port towns such as Cotonou.

Ahmad happily accepted Mohammed's offer, unaware that his new European business partner, in order to cut back expenses, sourced his cars in Belgian scrap yards. Although the trade in damaged or otherwise substandard cars became a more widespread practice later on,<sup>21</sup> the first shipment of wrecked cars caught Ahmad by surprise. 'My friends laughed at me', Ahmad recalls, 'and they told me that

<sup>20</sup> The company's prestige peaked after the New York Stock Exchange started trading ACLN shares in 1997. The trade was suspended early in 2002, however, following accusations by the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) of financial malpractice. For further information, see *Trends Magazine*, <[www.trends.be](http://www.trends.be)>, of 8 August 2002; the SEC's legal proceedings are published at <[www.sec.gov/litigation/litreleases/lr18888.htm](http://www.sec.gov/litigation/litreleases/lr18888.htm)>. Mr F. van der Spek is kindly thanked for pointing out the significance of this case to me.

<sup>21</sup> The trade in scrapped cars was discouraged in 1997 following an EU directive issued that year, aiming to ban the export of so-called 'end-of-life vehicles', see <[http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/waste/elv\\_index.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/waste/elv_index.htm)>. The export of damaged cars from the EU continues to the present day, however. This is because exported cars are generally not subjected to a MOT or other technical vehicle tests.



I'd wasted my money.' To Ahmad it was clear that Mohammed had played a trick on him by holding back crucial information about his business partner's sourcing practices. In addition to suffering loss of face, the matter therefore left Ahmad with a deep suspicion regarding Mohammed's motives for collaboration. Moreover, the arrival of the malfunctioning cars presented Ahmad with the considerable logistical problem of transporting the vehicles from the port to the car market, and then seeking technical assistance there to prepare the cars for resale. Mathieu played a key role in solving both problems, so that his contact with Ahmad became more permanent around this time. Buying spare parts to fix the cars depleted most of Ahmad's financial reserves, and he turned, via Abu-Zeid, to his fellow *paillote* occupants for help. In particular, a former El Dorado Lebanese drinking companion responded to his request and advanced him some cash. Contact with this young man, Akram, the son of a former LWCU board member,<sup>22</sup> also brought Ahmad to the Sheraton hotel, where better-off Lebanese regularly meet for a chat and a drink. A few months later, at one of the Lebanese Sunday *matinées* in the lobby of the hotel, Ahmad learned that two lorries owned by Lebanese living in Germany had broken down in the nearby port of Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire). Afraid that the Ivoirian customs might seize the valuable vehicles, they needed someone to handle the problem. Ahmad decided to step in, thus heralding a brief, but disastrous, foreign spell.

Ahmad's declining business, and his plans to travel to Côte d'Ivoire, had put a strain on his relations with Fatina. Their relationship deteriorated during 1999 following Ahmad's repeated refusal to introduce her to his new circle of contacts, and by the end of the year, just before Ahmad's departure early in 2000, she flew back to Lebanon with a ticket paid for by her father. Without paying much attention to the issue, Ahmad then travelled to Abidjan in his car, driven by Mathieu. During the preceding months, relations between the men had changed from an occasional, 'job-by-job' mode to a more regular labour relationship. Ahmad's frequent car repairs had brought Mathieu some cash, which he then wanted to invest in the car trade as a reseller. Although he was able buy a car from Ahmad on favourable terms, he did not succeed in selling it at a profit. Thus Mathieu became indebted to Ahmad, and lacking the funds to repay the money due immediately, he offered his manpower in return.<sup>23</sup> Needing someone reliable to support him on his trip to Côte d'Ivoire, Ahmad took his former mechanic on as his right-hand man. Recovering the lorries in Abidjan proved a tedious job – the absence of shipping documents was aggravated by difficulties in transferring cash from Germany – yet a few

<sup>22</sup> The Lebanese World Cultural Union is a worldwide non-governmental lobby organization, supporting political and economic interests for Lebanese expatriates; see their website at <[www.ulcm.org](http://www.ulcm.org)>.

<sup>23</sup> Ahmad thus ignored the negative advice issued by the Lebanese Council a few months earlier to end the widespread practice of Lebanese traders handing out credit to west African employees.



weeks later the lorries were ready for use. Though the intention had been to sell the vehicles, the deteriorating political situation in Côte d'Ivoire made buyers wary. Marking time, Ahmad started running a transport service between town and the airport – but then, during the attempted coup of January 2001, both vehicles were confiscated. 'It was terrible,' Ahmad recalls. 'The police came, they took the keys and drove off!' As the revolt rapidly spread, Ahmad had little choice but to return to Cotonou, where he arrived later that month – destitute once more.

*Cotonou today, 2001–3*

The last phase of Ahmad's professional career is marked by diversification into different economic arenas, accompanied by a number of commercial innovations. At first this seems odd, because Ahmad returned almost empty-handed, without enough capital to resume his car business. The remainder of Ahmad's professional history, nonetheless, will show how the interplay of his intimate knowledge of local conditions with his ability to exert moral pressure on family members, and with his (local) business contacts, created a situation wherein he could secure access to cash and credit and thus continue his affairs in Cotonou.

Ever since Ahmad had broken off his business contact with Mohammed by embarking on the failed Ivoirean adventure, he had sought a new trade. During the first few weeks of his stay in Cotonou, he therefore frequently visited his former contacts, at home, but also at the car markets where he became once more a well-known figure. Hajja Woudjoud, a wealthy (Muslim) Yoruba businesswoman who had established a prosperous wax (cloth) trade during the 1980s,<sup>24</sup> came to play an important role in Ahmad's life during this period. Following a number of prestigious nominations,<sup>25</sup> and having during the foregoing years frequently arranged and financed rallies for the Parti du Renouveau Démocratique (PRD), a political party that largely depends on Bénin's Yoruba business community for its support, she ran for political office in 2002. Thus, when the Béninese government announced the issuing of a new round of market concessions to expand the area available for car trading in 1999, she was given permission to establish a car market on a stretch of land adjacent to Tony Micha's. In her capacity as political organizer she had previously met Mathieu, who had been an active PRD youth member while still a young car mechanic, and later, when working with Ahmad, had started acting as *animateur* (master of ceremonies) at party meetings. Though Hajja Woudjoud met Ahmad through Mathieu, their contact endured because they got along

<sup>24</sup> Muslim pilgrims who have completed the pilgrimage to Mecca (Saudi Arabia) are entitled to add the honorific phrase Hadj (Hajja for women) to their names. Wealthy businesswomen, travelling between Europe and west Africa, are locally called 'Nana-Benz' (cf. Sengel 2000).

<sup>25</sup> She was elected as a board member of Bénin's Chamber of Commerce, and subsequently became a member of the prestigious private-public Association pour la Promotion du Port de Cotonou.

well. In particular, Woudjoud seemed to like Ahmad's good-natured spirit – which set him apart from the other Lebanese men she had met in her time as a wax and clothing trader.

His prestigious liaison with Woudjoud helped Ahmad to breathe new life into his contact with the two Lebanese brothers running the German lorry-export company. Although they were at first angry with Ahmad for bungling the sale of the two vehicles, they quickly came round after they appreciated the magnitude of the Lebanese exodus from Côte d'Ivoire in 2001. Thus they worked out a favourable restitution arrangement, allowing Ahmad to settle the debt little by little. What is more, fuelled by the vibrancy of the western European second-hand car markets, one of the brothers, Issam, a part-time employee at a Dutch shipper, wanted to set up a parallel trade in passenger cars. For that he first contacted the associates of Tony Micha, by now an icon of success in the Lebanese car trade in Europe. In Micha's absence, however, his market in Cotonou had taken a turn for the worse and was now commonly associated with widespread car theft and rampant corruption, leaving many new entrants into the car trade little choice but to seek their stock elsewhere. The brothers then started looking around for an alternative, which was presented to them by Ahmad in the form of Woudjoud's car market, conveniently just around the corner from the Micha market. As a result, in mid-2002 Ahmad received the first German shipment, a handful of top-of-the-range, high-priced second-hand cars. Although he achieved reasonable prices for the cars, Ahmad found that subsequent shipments arrived at irregular intervals, and often contained incomplete export documentation – necessitating extensive deliberation with the port authorities.

Around the time that Ahmad set up his business in Woudjoud's market, Fatina came back to Cotonou. The couple had agreed to leave their child in the care of Fatina's parents, so that she could attend school in Beirut. But to Ahmad's surprise Fatina showed up not alone but accompanied by their mutual relative Khaled, a polytechnic engineer with some previous work experience in Nigeria's oil fields. After talks with his paternal uncle (Abu Naja), Khaled had decided to enter the west African car business with the money he had earned, complemented by his share of his father's estate – in total the substantial sum of about US\$25,000. Although Ahmad and Khaled had never met before, Fatina knew him from her childhood and had become fond of the young man. Following a common practice among Lebanese families, Khaled stayed for a while with the couple. And although Ahmad was not too keen on having the young man around – he once more dreaded his father-in-law's interference – Ahmad nonetheless acquainted Khaled with the car business. In particular, Ahmad first handed over to Khaled the complicated task of arranging the transport of newly arrived cars from the port to Woudjoud's market. However, Khaled repeatedly failed to prevent the theft of spare parts that usually peaks when car-carrying ships dock in the port of Cotonou. Consequently, Ahmad became disappointed with his younger nephew, and therefore assigned him the little-liked and tedious job of hanging around the *paillote* to survey the

market in between sales. This was much to the dismay of Mathieu's brother who had recently started to work, with Khaled as his sidekick: 'all the time he asks me what to do, or he calls his uncle to tell him what to do: he understands nothing of this business!'

Relations between Ahmad and Khaled were unsettled from the beginning; they never got along well, but their contact rapidly became tense after the following incident. One night while Ahmad was out, policemen came to his house and arrested Khaled, at that time the only man at home. Oblivious of why he was being detained, Khaled nonetheless agreed to accompany them and was jailed. The following morning he found Ahmad at the gate of the police station to bail him out. Reluctantly, Ahmad later told Khaled that Tony Micha, whose enterprise had recently evolved to operating a shipping line, had wanted to press charges against Mohammed over an overdue freight bill. The available evidence suggests that the downswing of the Cotonou car market (and indeed of car markets in the region) set in motion by late 1999/early 2000 saw an increase in credit arrangements between ship owners and their customers, mostly shipping companies but also large car traders such as Mohammed. With stagnating car sales in Cotonou, payback terms of freight costs often lengthened, and many shipping companies eventually ran into financial trouble. They tried to curb their losses, and in some cases did not stop short of threatening their debtors' close family members. When Mohammed Kabbani had gone into hiding in Brussels to dodge his former friend, Tony Micha had tried to pursue his financial claim through Kabbani's kinsmen living in Cotonou.

The incident shook Khaled profoundly. 'In there everyone sees you,' he commented on the prison cages that are clearly visible from the street, 'and the food is rotten!' He also realized that Ahmad's quick intervention had spared him from a longer stay in prison and hence from further embarrassment. In sum, as a result of the incident Khaled came to appreciate that he needed Ahmad's support to further his efforts to set up a car business in Cotonou. Khaled's understanding clearly suited Ahmad's ambitions. Dissatisfied with his German car imports, Ahmad had sought another activity, and after some time found it in the handling of shipping documents.<sup>26</sup> With the increase in the scale of car imports into Cotonou came a shift in the settlement of freight costs from payment at the port of origin to payment at destination. Whereas at first this shift occurred at the level of personal contacts between shipping companies and their (larger) clients, the mid-1990s saw specialized agencies handle the collection of the shipping fees in Cotonou. Whereas shipping margins came under pressure during the late 1990s (personal communication, Mrs M. Kleinbussink), handling the fees continued to offer two indirect advantages to local agents: first, the right to claim a car for resale if it was not sold within a specified period after arrival;

<sup>26</sup> This type of document, a bill of lading, is generally seen as proof of ownership and entitles the bearer to collect specified goods at a port of destination.

and, second, the possibility of controlling the transport of cars from the port to the markets – an additional, revenue-earning service.

In order to operate a shipping agency in this manner, Ahmad needed cash, mainly to pay the collateral, which usually amounts to about one month's shipping revenues,<sup>27</sup> but also to recruit additional manpower to protect and transport the new arrivals. Ahmad therefore called upon Khaled for financial help, and, though reluctant, he advanced his uncle the required funds. The transaction suited their changed relations, yet it left Khaled unsettled. 'I should never have parted with my money,' Khaled complains in retrospect. 'When this fails, I'll surely be the laughing-stock.' Backed with the money, Ahmad next turned to Issam and soon thereafter received the wax-sealed letters, specifying him as the shipper's formal west African representative. In the shipper's decision to go ahead with Ahmad, Abu-Zeid's recent election as World Union board member seems to have played a decisive role. After a few unsuccessful attempts with former customers, the Dutch shipper had become wary of self-proclaimed agents and pressed, in their words, for 'men of standing' – a status borrowed from his brother in which Ahmad was happy to recognize himself.

The story of Ahmad's economic career ends in tragedy a few months later. Half-way through the cloudless afternoon of Christmas Day, 2003, Union des Transports Africains (UTA) flight 141 crashed on take-off at Cotonou's international airport – killing most of its 160 passengers.<sup>28</sup> The plane, a Boeing 727, was bound for Beirut, and soon after the accident news agencies reported that it had been carrying Lebanese businessmen returning home for Christmas – a remarkable conclusion, if one considers that most of the men aboard were Lebanese Muslims. The agencies were right to state that most of the passengers were homeward-bound, but they misinterpreted their motives. Most of the Lebanese aboard the plane were indeed travelling to the Middle East: not to celebrate, however, but because they had abandoned their businesses in Bénin shortly before. UTA, a mixed Lebanese-Guinean charter company, had watched car sales in Cotonou plummet earlier that year, and rightly foresaw the departure of many a young Lebanese man. By mid-2003 they started to operate a regular service between Cotonou and Beirut, and until the crash most of their twice-weekly flights had been fully booked. Most of these young men had come to Cotonou during the late 1990s, undoubtedly encouraged by Lebanon's high unemployment rate, but especially lured by rumours of quick gains to be made from the car business. Their African adventure was not meant to last, however. By the time they arrived in Cotonou, the

<sup>27</sup> During the 1990s, shipping rates from the Netherlands to Cotonou fluctuated between €400 and €650 per unit. At the time, Ahmad imported on average 25 cars per month. Thus the collateral would amount to about €13,000.

<sup>28</sup> The bodies of those killed in the accident were collected by Lebanese authorities and dispatched for burial to Lebanon. The accident killed a substantial proportion of the Lebanese community in Cotonou – at the time of the accident estimated to be around 2,500 adult men (personal communication, LWCU 2004).

second-hand car boom was no longer in full swing. Most of them suffered considerable losses as a result, and with few financial resources to back them up, they felt they had little choice but to return to Lebanon.

Among the victims was Abu-Zeid. Not long before Khaled's arrest, Mohammed had stopped sending cars to Cotonou altogether, leaving Abu-Zeid empty-handed. He then agreed with Ahmad to travel to Europe, via a stopover in Beirut for family visits, principally to settle the bill with the Dutch shipper, but also to track down Mohammed. The crash ended both prospects, taking not only Abu-Zeid's life, but also the money he had strapped to his body for security reasons – realizing Khaled's worst fear, that of losing his money.

#### SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF LEBANESE BUSINESS CONTACTS

Ahmad's professional life is an example of a multiple enterprise. It tells the story of how Sunni Muslim Lebanese traders settled in the second-hand car trade in west Africa during the early 1990s, and subsequently became important economic agents. Close analysis of the determinants of this type of commercial enterprise will therefore shed some light on a broader process of capital accumulation and economic mobility in this part of the world.

The material presented above suggests that the career trajectories of these (Sunni Muslim) Lebanese traders are typically characterized by three elements. First, they are not limited to a single economic activity, but are organized as an occupational sequence: moving from one economic arena, or economic activity, into another. Second, this movement, entailing nine professions within two decades in Ahmad's case, is marked by fluctuation: these traders regularly lose large sums of money; although sometimes their gains are considerable, they never result in secure access to long-term (trade) resources. Third, they straddle their direct involvement in the car trade (resale or import) with other commercial activity, including parallel trade. I argue that the social dynamic of the business network is an important factor explaining this complex pattern of economic mobility. Business contacts serve therein as channels for cash, access and market information, and therefore determine the outcome of the economic pursuits of these Lebanese traders. The empirical material further suggests that an important distinction within the business network of the Lebanese traders is one between dealing with family members and with other contacts – notably with friends and peers. Moreover, it suggests that this network presents a configuration of social contacts that is shaped by the ideal of these traders: to enjoy life. These points will be further discussed in the following paragraphs.

#### *Family-based business*

At the beginning of their careers, Lebanese traders are highly dependent on close family members. In this stage of their professional lives,

they usually lack the start-up capital and necessary experience to set up a business, and hence young traders in particular gain access to essential trade resources mainly through their nuclear families. Parents are considered the primary source for that; significantly, most boys receive their first trading experience through working with their fathers. Financially, parents contribute to the costs of marriage and hence help a young man to set up his own household, which is a necessary asset to give the starting enterprise some momentum. As the case history of Ahmad exemplifies, the untimely death of a parent therefore presents a serious obstacle for young traders trying to develop a business career, since it cuts them off from an obvious avenue of acquaintance with the world of commerce and takes away an important source of financial support.

The presence of siblings comes next in significance for the organization of family-based business. Lebanese men seek support especially from their older brothers. Social relations between brothers operate in principle under a norm of solidarity, yet the tale of Mahmoud suggests that, when they are physically absent, support is often limited to (irregular) remittances. Sisters enter the Lebanese business organization mainly through their husbands. Although it is not uncommon for young Lebanese men to solicit assistance from their brothers-in-law to set up a business, Ahmad's story indicates that this is not a self-evident mode of resource mobilization. In general it appears that the larger the stake, the more a young man's reputation comes into play. This explains, for instance, why Hijazi recruited Ahmad for his overseas textile enterprise after Ahmad had demonstrated he was a responsible young man by taking good care of Fatina. In this particular case, Ahmad's recruitment was facilitated by the couple's childlessness; their children would otherwise have been given priority as future business partners.

Marriage exposes Lebanese novice traders to what they consider the flip side of family-based business: it promotes undesirable, yet hardly avoidable, interference by in-laws. This is strongly related to the type of marriage involved. Lebanese first marriages are often with partners drawn from a range of distant kinsmen that they indicate with the classificatory term 'cousins'. Such cross-marriages, to which Ahmad's was no exception (and Abu-Zeid's and Mohammed's marriages provide further examples), result in double kinship ties between individuals. Furthermore, their marriages are usually enduring social arrangements; Ahmad's case shows that even if marriage is often an emotionally unsettling affair, thus leading to temporary separation, legal divorce is uncommon (see also Peleikis 1998). On the one hand, Lebanese marriage therefore prevents valuable resources from disappearing from families following divorce or the death of one party, and thus promotes the integrity of family possession. On the other hand, as Ahmad's case illustrates, double kinship ties often present a 'thickening' of existing social relations that opens up the possibility for close surveillance. Thus, while for young Lebanese men a good marriage is the pivot for their business – it may bring them into contact with renowned



entrepreneurial families – it simultaneously presents them with a new set of practical constraints. In Ahmad's case, Abu Naja's presence engendered a downward pressure on his personal spending while in Nigeria, and, back in Lebanon, frustrated Ahmad's wish to expand the shop.

Engaging in contacts with more distant family members, such as for instance nephews and (particularly male) cousins, is a common way for Lebanese traders to set up a business overseas; however, Ahmad's career history shows that it presents a problematic form of collaboration.<sup>29</sup> On the one hand, working with distant family members operates under the expectation of kin solidarity, which promotes the practice of family-based chain migration. This practice helps to create a foundation for building transnational businesses, in its simplest form involving accommodation of visiting family members, but also including more elaborate forms of assistance. On the other hand, Ahmad's career history shows that collaboration, in this case between nephew and uncle, is an unstable arrangement for conducting business. The difficulties experienced, for instance in pooling trade resources, appear to have their foundation in the social organization of Lebanese families. It is common for Lebanese kinsmen to live far apart over long periods of time, and many of my Lebanese informants explained that they had never seen their (extended) families assembled in a single location. The empirical material further suggests that the more distant family contacts are, the less likely they are to be grounded in a social relation; this, in turn, easily slips into an unbalanced form of social interaction, which, as exemplified by Khaled's tale, may eventually harden into patronage. This organizational feature reinforces differences in settlement history between individual traders. For instance, while Ahmad had completed an extensive learning trajectory to deal with the complexities of car trading in Cotonou, Khaled had little (trading) experience in west Africa, save a brief spell in Nigeria, and was therefore no real match for Ahmad when the going got rough.

It is striking to notice that, despite the different sorts of difficulties that most Lebanese traders experience in dealing with close and distant family members for the operation of their business enterprises, these seldom result in a permanent break. My field research suggests that the apparent resilience of these contacts fits into a broader pattern of Lebanese migrants' ongoing contacts with Lebanon: their mother tongue remains Arabic, they prefer to send their children back to Lebanon for schooling, and they usually marry Lebanese wives. To cope with the disadvantages of family-based enterprise, the Lebanese appear to follow a strategy of social diversification by developing contacts with Lebanese friends and, in the case of Lebanese migrants in west Africa, with Africans. This phenomenon will be analysed in greater detail in the next section.

<sup>29</sup> See Beuving (2006) for a similar discussion on the problematic nature of kinship in running a second-hand car business in west Africa.



*Other forms of business contacts*

For Lebanese migrants in west Africa, contacts with peers and friends come to play an increasingly important role in running a business, particularly in the later stages of their professional careers. These social contacts are often created in bars, beach clubs and other places of entertainment, and they are subsequently reproduced at markets, ports or similar centres of economic activity. Usually such friendships are organized as so-called drinking groups. These groups form an important part of the Lebanese leisure-time repertoire, whereby especially young unmarried men, or young married men unaccompanied by their wives, of roughly the same age go out together on a regular basis. Their drinking habits are conspicuous; rather than consuming the cheap local beer, they instead order expensive, imported liquor. In the case of Ahmad, these drinking contacts then spilled over into the *paillote*, where he, like other Lebanese traders, spent much time during market days waiting for his clientele to arrive. Life in the *paillote* therefore provides ample opportunity for the traders to develop a working knowledge of the behaviour and trading practices of their colleagues. It appears that when these forms of social contact overlap, they may transform into a source of mutual support; hence Ahmad's recourse to his former *paillote* contacts after he returned bankrupt to Cotonou. The importance of these contacts in enabling traders to hold their ground is exemplified by Khaled's story: the lack of befriended *paillote* contacts was instrumental to his commercial downfall.

The empirical material allows one tentatively to suggest that activation of contacts with friends coincides with a shift in the operational mode of the enterprise: in the case of Ahmad's second-hand car trade, from purely carrying out trade to pursuing activities in the service industry. This shift relates to the information function that these contacts fulfil by channelling news and gossip within a specific domain of economic activity and, perhaps even more important, between different economic domains. An important hub in this information network is the Lebanese Union and its members. Among other things, this non-governmental advocacy organization mediates between Lebanese (traders) and the west African political and business community. Although board membership is in principle accessible to all those interested, my informants explained that in practice it is controlled by a handful of well-established Lebanese families. Getting in touch with members of these families is therefore an important way to tap into a different range of business opportunities; for instance, it brought Ahmad to a new set of business contacts and hence enabled him to adopt a strategy of (economic) diversification.

An altogether different domain of social interaction that significantly influences the working of Lebanese commercial enterprise is contacts with west Africans. Ahmad's life history suggests that these Lebanese-African relations stem chiefly from a shared profession or trade. This creates the setting for the incorporation of west African contacts, which often starts with the recruitment of employees. A common pathway is the gradual evolution of debt ties, mostly with trusted

craftsmen or other specialists, into an employer–employee relationship. Lebanese businessmen often have a lot of money out on credit, and in an expanding market settling these debts generally poses no serious problem. However, when the economic tide changes, reclaiming the capital becomes a function of the social relation with their African debtors. The arrangements that arise from lending usually entail a marked intensification of these relations, creating scope for exerting moral pressure on debtors. Although Lebanese traders do their utmost to recoup the money due in this fashion (business disputes are almost never brought to court), a widely practised alternative consists of offering the debtor a temporary job; this, in turn, expands the labour pool of the enterprise, a factor that is important for its continuation. These arrangements are fraught with conflict and therefore short-lived, not least because Lebanese employers deduct loan repayments from such employees' salaries. Lebanese traders repeatedly complain about the unreliability of their African employees, who, in turn, are never short of an anecdote stressing the barbaric nature of their patrons. However, as the case of Mathieu suggests, it can also transform into a more or less stable arrangement, offering mutual advantage. The stability of such relations appears to be rooted, first, in past practice – in particular, when a veteran Lebanese trader becomes associated with an experienced African employee, problems are less likely to arise between them – and, second, in mutual acquaintance with one another's domestic circles.

Lebanese–African business contacts are not limited to an employer–employee relationship; more balanced forms of collaboration exist as well, notably through contacts with the local west African business community. The joint venture charter company UTA is a clear case in point; Ahmad's liaison with Woudjoud presents another example. Some of these collaborations go as far back as the nineteenth century, when Christian Lebanese families settled in colonial French west Africa. However, for the traders sampled for this research it appears a more recent phenomenon. These contacts are an important precondition for the expansion of ongoing enterprise, for they enlarge Lebanese control over trade resources. Ahmad's story suggests, however, that contacts with African businessmen (and women), though widespread, are generally social arrangements with little else at stake than the transaction they embody. These relations are, furthermore, difficult to get started and are often accomplished through the Lebanese person's African employees acting as intermediaries. With few exceptions,<sup>30</sup> they are not institutionalized in trading clubs or other instances of frequent encounter, nor are they regulated, for instance through religious practice. Although they regularly surround themselves with the icons of Islam (Quran, framed full-colour photographs of the Hadj in Mecca), my Lebanese informants frequently pointed out that they are not devout

<sup>30</sup> For the second-hand car trade, the Union Nationale des Importateurs et Revendeurs de Véhicules d'Occasion au Bénin (UNIRVOB) stands out as an organization that is governed by both Lebanese and Béninese businessmen.

mosque-goers, and most of them prefer to carry out prayer and other religious rituals at home.

A final category of contacts with west Africans is formed outside the domain of trade and consists of amorous relations between Lebanese men and African women. Marriages with west African women are rare (though some occur), yet for a Lebanese man it is quite common to have African girlfriends. Young men commonly meet the girls, locally called *petites amies*, mainly at places of leisure (El Dorado in the case of Cotonou), while older men tend to invite the girls to their houses – when their wives are not around, of course. ‘In Lebanon, you cannot talk just like that to any girl,’ a young Lebanese once explained to me; ‘you’ll need an introduction, first you talk to her brothers, and father, and maybe then you’ll get to go out with her.’ Association with African girls is a rich topic of gossip among the Lebanese, particularly when it involves the more hidden domain of love affairs with domestic staff. It is further an important source of marital conflict, adding to the instability of Lebanese overseas marriage. But, above all, the love affairs usually drain cash away from Lebanese enterprises. This drain ranges from small-scale expenditure, such as paying for a night out (illustrated by the anecdote at the beginning of the article), to more significant spending. Ahmad, for instance, at the time of my fieldwork gave his girlfriend Aisha considerable sums of cash and presents, which culminated in the gift of a (second-hand) car for her twenty-first birthday. By the end of the fieldwork, Aisha had thus managed to set up a vegetable stall at Cotonou’s largest open-air daily market, Dantokpa, and to run a small transport company.

### *The logic of an expatriate lifestyle*

So far I have tried to argue that the development of Lebanese business entails a shifting pattern of resource mobilization and changes in social networks. In general, setting up a business appears to be associated with close family contacts; they regulate the first attempts of Lebanese traders to accumulate capital. Running a transnational enterprise depends, in addition, on contact with more distant kinsmen, and, to a lesser extent, on contacts with African employees. A change in direction of the business relates to closer collaboration with Lebanese friends, while business expansion appears to be a function of developing ongoing contacts with the African business community. The analysis has not yet paid attention to the logic of social relations management: why are some contacts preferred, while others appear to be avoided in running a business? To address this important question I argue that it is necessary to delve into the culturally determined motivations of Lebanese traders.

Ahmad’s remarks at the beginning of this article give a clue as to why he wants to stay in west Africa. Even though acting as a businessman there did not bring him riches, Ahmad retains his strong commitment to the ideal of leading a carefree personal life. Lebanese migrant traders like Ahmad aim to achieve this ideal by settling abroad, in the case of this study, in west Africa. Lebanese businessmen are acutely aware of the instability and unpredictability associated with doing business in west

Africa – they complain endlessly about it – yet for them the ensuing insecurity and financial losses do not make west Africa less attractive than a more secure existence elsewhere, particularly in Lebanon. Three important ingredients of this expatriate lifestyle are: first, informal contact with young African women; second, the possibility of indulging in conspicuous consumption, preferably in the company of friends; and, third and perhaps most significant, the scope to attain independence from kin ties.

With this expatriate lifestyle comes a propensity to keep social contacts at bay. The actual way in which Lebanese migrant traders lead their lives does not, however, seamlessly fit this ideal but, instead, appears to be the outcome of three simultaneously operating social processes. First, their attempts to distance themselves from family-based business contacts are countered by their ongoing multi-stranded contacts with Lebanon. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to entirely avoid dealing with family members. However, a prolonged stay abroad entails a gradual dissolution of family contacts, and, in particular, contact with distant kinsmen then becomes increasingly experienced as a single-stranded form of social interaction (only knowing each other in a single, specialized role). It results in more loosely knit social networks and therefore enhances the degrees of freedom that individual traders experience, but it also contributes to the insecurity of doing business overseas. Second, the Lebanese business network shows a progressive incorporation of African contacts. Although in some cases these contacts pertain to different spheres of social interaction, the general pattern of Lebanese traders interacting with the local business community and with their African employees is one of social specialization defined by purpose. Third, in the course of running their businesses, friendships between Lebanese businessmen appear to gain in prominence, and hence in many observed cases have become an important source of economic security by providing access to key trade resources. However, most of these friendships remain occasional contacts; they continue to be firmly rooted in expensive leisure activities, and therefore drain resources from business activities. The interlocking of these processes results in a restless existence: the careers of Lebanese traders show a rapid succession of different economic activities, and their social lives appear to be in a permanent state of change.

#### CONCLUSION

This article discussed the role of Lebanese businessmen in the European–west African second-hand car trade. An extensive exploration of one Lebanese trader's 'multiple enterprise' uncovered a situation of change, with fluctuating business performance regularly involving financial losses. This article has therefore sought to disaggregate the stereotype of Lebanese as successful entrepreneurs into different pathways towards capital accumulation. The shifting configuration of business contacts appears to be an important explanatory factor for this

interesting business pattern: for the Sunni Muslim Lebanese traders studied in this article, it starts as a mainly kin-based enterprise but gradually leads to an incorporation of peers and friends. While social contacts are part of the business success and failure of these traders, their increasing preference for more single-stranded, occasional personal contacts is not an instrumental response to avoid social obligations and hence accumulate capital. It follows rather from an important cultural factor found among the Lebanese migrant traders: the ideal of enjoying life by adopting an expatriate lifestyle.

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## ABSTRACT

Passenger cars and other small vehicles have for a long time been the backbone of transport in west Africa. The cars are usually second-hand, and they are sourced on overseas car markets, mostly in western Europe. During the 1990s the port town of Cotonou, Bénin, became one of the most prominent hubs in this car trade: car markets mushroomed, attracting large numbers and a wide variety of traders – including a prominent contingent of Lebanese. This article discusses the role of these Lebanese traders in the car trade through a reconstruction of their careers. It reveals that Lebanese business, which can go

through a rapid succession of different economic activities, starts as kin-based enterprise, but gradually incorporates peers and friends. Close analysis of this practice suggests that Lebanese immigrant traders are to a large extent driven by the ideal of enjoying life by adopting an expatriate lifestyle.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Les voitures de tourisme et autres petits véhicules sont depuis longtemps la cheville ouvrière du transport en Afrique de l'Ouest. Ce sont généralement des voitures d'occasion achetées sur les marchés automobiles étrangers, principalement en Europe de l'Ouest. Au cours des années 1990, la ville portuaire de Cotonou, au Bénin, est devenue la principale plaque tournante du commerce de voitures: les marchés de voitures se sont rapidement multipliés, attirant en grand nombre des commerçants divers et variés, y compris un important contingent libanais. Cet article s'intéresse au rôle de ces commerçants libanais dans le commerce automobile en reconstituant leurs carrières. Il révèle que le commerce libanais, qui peut passer rapidement d'une activité économique à une autre, démarre sous la forme d'une entreprise familiale qui peu à peu intègre des pairs et des amis. Une analyse approfondie de cette pratique suggère que les commerçants immigrés libanais sont dans une large mesure motivés par un idéal de jouissance de la vie en adoptant un style de vie d'expatrié.